

Gadget predicts drug reaction

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Doctors could soon be using a Star Trek-style device the size of a BlackBerry to check patients' genetic suitability to different medicines.

A prototype of the hand-held device is already being tested by British scientists, who say it could be on the market in two years.

The SNP (pronounced snip) Doctor is the kind of gadget that might be used by Dr Leonard McCoy in the original Star Trek TV series.

From a drop of saliva or cheek swab it can analyse DNA to tell if a patient has the right genetic fit for a particular drug.

The Snip Doctor looks for known single nucleotide polymorphisms (SNPs) - single letter changes in the genetic code - that can affect an individual's response to medical treatment.

Each year the NHS spends around £460 million dealing with the 250,000 patients who are admitted to hospital suffering adverse reactions to prescribed drugs.

The unwanted side effects can vary in severity from dizziness and nausea to heart palpitations or loss of consciousness.

Being able to predict bad responses to drugs such as antidepressants or cholesterol-lowering statins would allow doctors to tailor dosages and types of medication to individual patients.

Scientists at Imperial College London and its spin-out company DNA Electronics are now carrying out trials of the Snip Doctor's effectiveness.

The finished product will be an all-in-one device that can rapidly analyse a sample placed in its cartridge and flash the result up on a screen.

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